VIII.

MUTUAL RELATION OF MASTERS AND SLAVES AS TAUGHT IN THE BIBLE.

A DISCOURSE

PREACHED IN THE

First Presbyterian Church,

AUGUSTA, GEORGIA,

On Sabbath Morning, Jan. 6, 1861,

By JOSEPH R. WILSON, D. D., Pastor.

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CORRESPONDENCE.

Augusta, January 7th, 1861.

TO THE REV. DR. WILSON:—

Rev. and Dear Sir:—Having heard your sermon on yesterday, and believing it to be of such a character that its free circulation may bring about great good, and a better understanding of the basis upon which the relation of Master and Slave, as it exists in the Southern States, rests: and that, to sustain us in our position, we have both "the law and the testimony," we earnestly ask a copy of it for publication.

With sentiments of the highest esteem, we are yours, &c.,

Geo. T. Jackson,
Alfred Baker,
J. S. Wilcox,
J. A. Ansley,
M. Wilkinson,
W. W. Alexander,
John K. Jackson,
C. A. Rowland,
D. H. Ansley,
J. W. Bones,
T. W. Chichester.

Augusta, January 8th, 1861.

Gentlemen:—I confess to an honest reluctance in allowing the publication of the sermon, a copy of which you politely request. It was not written with a view to wide circulation, nor was it prepared with *exclusive* reference to the present unhappy agitations of the popular mind. You are aware that it is the closing discourse of a series upon "Family Government," intended for my own church, and for immediate effect at home. But, still, its discussion may be the means of doing a service to my slaveholding brethren throughout the State, by promoting intelligence upon a momentous subject of practical interest to them and the whole world. It is surely high time that the Bible view of slavery should be examined, and that we should begin to meet the infidel fanaticism of our infatuated enemies upon the elevated ground of a divine warrant for the institution we are resolved to cherish. My sermon is, therefore, placed at your disposal. Your sincere friend and servant

for Christ's sake,
Joseph R. Wilson.

To Messrs. Jackson, Alexander, Baker and others.

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DISCOURSE.

EPHESIANS, VI: 5–9:—"Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; not with eye-service as men-pleasers, but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good-will doing service, as to the Lord and not to men; knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free. And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening, knowing that your Master also is in Heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him."

I.

Our attention is forcibly arrested by the very first word of this text; "*servants.*" There is no difficulty in ascertaining its true meaning, in the original Greek. It distinctly and unequivocally signifies "*slaves,*" springing as it does in this its substantive form from a verbal root, which means *to bind.* There are several words, conveying different shades of thought, which Grecians were accustomed to employ in speaking of servants, inasmuch as there are several kinds and degrees of servitude. But no one of them does so emphatically set forth the true and simple idea of domestic slavery as understood in these Southern States, as the word "δούλοσ"—the word whose plural form opens our text. It refers us to a man who is in the relation of permanent and legal bondage to another: this other having in him and his labor the strictest rights of *property.* The word is never employed to indicate the condition of a

mere hireling. It points out a dependent who is solely under the authority of a *master:* that master being the head of a household and wielding over his slaves the commission of a despot, whose acts are to be determined only by the restraining laws of Christianity and by general considerations of his own and their welfare: a despot responsible to God, a good conscience, and the well-being of society. I use this word "despot" advisedly. It is the scriptural opposite of "slave," as in the passage from the 1st Epistle to Timothy: "Let as many servants (δουλους) as are under the yoke count their own masters (δεσποτας) worthy of all honor;" and as in the words taken from the Epistle to Titus: "Exhort servants to be obedient to their own masters"—*slaves* to be obedient to their *despots.* In the passage immediately under discussion, the word "servants" has for its antithesis the word which may be rendered "lords," and which, in its lowest signification, means "possessors," "owners," "masters" in a sense sufficiently absolute. As a freedman, in the New Testament sense, is one who is at liberty to go and act and be what he pleases, so a slave is one who goes and acts and is controlled by a superior will. And not only do the *New Testament* writers use the word δουλος, to express the meaning I have shown it to have; this meaning is likewise common to all the ancient authors, whose works in the Greek language are considered classic; men who wrote with strict attention to verbal accuracy, and whose compositions came from their pens at a time when domestic slavery was a universal institution. I have been thus particular in establishing the true import of this word, for a purpose. The time has fully come when all who are interested personally in the subject of Southern institutions—whether

masters or servants—should comprehend their *scriptural* relation to them—should know whether or not the holiness of God receives or rejects them—and whether in all our possible contentions for their maintenance we are to have only men for our enemies or, in addition, our Sovereign Ruler also. Now, we have already seen that the Holy Spirit employs words which He has intended to be understood as distinctly enunciating the existence of domestic servitude—that He has sent to all the world a volume of truth, which is indisputably addressed to men who hold slaves and to the slaves who possess masters—and that, from the connections in which these highly suggestive words occur, He has included slavery as an organizing element in that family order which lies at the very foundation of Church and State. A study of such words is, therefore, a first and an important step in ascertaining the will of God with respect to an institution which short sighted men have indiscriminately and violently denounced, and which wicked men have declared unworthy of the countenance of a Christianity whose peaceful and conservative spirit, as applied to society, they neither respect nor understand.

II.

I am sure that you will bear with me while I take another step in this great argument, and show how completely the Bible brings human slavery underneath the sanction of divine authority, upon other and stronger grounds. Indeed, my text *compels* me to take this course—for, if *our* domestic servitude be *essentially* different from that to which the Apostle's exhortations refer, we do but beat the air with empty sounds when we endeavor to apply them to the

masters and servants who compose the christian congregations of this section of our country. If Paul, or rather the great God, speaking by his inspired lips, meant to confine his evangelical teachings to a state of things wholly unlike that under which we live, then this portion of Scripture is to us a dead letter, and can have no influence upon our consciences or conduct. If we preach from it at all, therefore, it must be employed for the practical benefit of hearers *now* as much as when the *Ephesian* church opened their ears and hearts to its reception. And, in truth, in the suggestions of this very thought, there is a remote scriptural plea to be found for the divine sanction of slavery. It would seem, that, inasmuch as the Bible was intended for all times and all ages, and not for one period and a single country, the fact that it gives directions as plain and full and forcible for the regulation of domestic service as it does for defining and limiting the marital, parental and filial relations in families, furnishes an inferential proof of the proposition that, everywhere, such *service* ought to be as universal as such higher and tenderer relations: that no household is perfect under the gospel which does not contain all the grades of authority and obedience, from that of husband and wife, down through that of father and son, to that of master and servant. Accordingly, we do find, as a matter of historical fact, that among all people, during all the periods of time, there have been those, in every family, whom the very law of necessity itself has made servants to the others; servants, if not always in the rigid sense which slavery seems to imply, yet in a sense sufficiently obvious and strict. Go where you will—visit what family you may, and you will find members of the household, under some

law which requires them more than the others, to perform menial services for all the little community. The hireling, the wife, the eldest child, the dependent stranger, may be the voluntary or involuntary doer of offices which must fall to the lot of *some one*. I need not point you to the manifold illustrations of this idea, which appears in all conditions of human society—even in those which are most favored—even in those from which come the most heated denunciations of a slavery which, existing among us, differs at best from their own more in degree and form than in essential qualities. There *must* be such inequalities in society; and whenever an attempt has been made to remove them—whenever radicalism has proposed to smooth down all individuals in the family or other community to a common level—as in the experiments of Fourierism, which once excited so much attention in the world,—it was found that a fundamental law had been transgressed, and failure inevitably attended such unscriptural and disorganizing attempts. God has evidently made one to serve another. The simple question is, what must be the *nature* of this service? The answer is, that its nature depends upon circumstances. And out of this answer springs the interrogation, has God ever shown us that there are circumstances under which *involuntary* service may be required and yielded on the part of masters and slaves? Has He ever declared this kind of service to be right, and lifted its existence entirely above the charge of sinfulness? Are we at full liberty to carry to Him upon the arms of our faith, our households, and as confidently ask Him to bless our servants as our children? Does this great, beneficial, civilizing institution of slavery live beneath the light of His face,

with no fault to be found with it upon the part of His infinite holiness, except when and wherein it may suffer abuse at the hands of the parties concerned? Surely the Bible is clear enough upon this point to satisfy the most sensitive conscience. Light cannot shine with greater brightness than does the doctrine of the sinlessness—nay, than does the doctrine of the righteousness—of an institution, which, besides being sustained and promoted by a long course of favorable providences, besides being recognized as a prime conservator of the civilization of the world, besides being one of the colored man's foremost sources of blessing, is likewise directly sanctioned by both the utterance and silence of Scripture.

III.

Look, first, at the most instructive *silence* of Scripture upon this subject. An obvious feature of the sacred word, whose office, in the hands of the Spirit, is to convince of sin and conduct to righteousness, is this: it never mentions a grave offence against God without denouncing it directly or impliedly: denouncing it, too, in the face of every human policy for maintaining its existence: denouncing it, that is, without the least regard to present consequences. The Bible *could not* wink at prevailing error, much less at prevailing crime, least of all at prevailing ungodliness, through any fear of arousing angry opposition against Christianity on the part of such as might hold the civil power, or of such as might direct the sneer of hatred. Christianity came, rather, as necessarily it must have come, as a "sword," to set men at "variance" on the field of a great fight between evil and good. Wherever, therefore,

it went in the early ages, it dealt incessant blows at idolatry, for example; blows which are now being repeated throughout the pagan world by an army of missionaries, whom no danger is sufficient to appal. Under all circumstances, too, falsehood comes under the frown of Scripture truth; so do theft, drunkenness, violence, murder, and a multitude of smaller offenses. In fact, on the deeply colored canvass of God's word, you find such a faithful representation of human guilt through all the turns and pretences and developments of the sinful heart, as leaves nothing wanting to complete the portraiture of that manifold criminality against which divine wrath breathes one constant stream of fiery condemnation. God will not, must not, cannot tamper with sin, in any of its forms, so long as He remains true to Himself and to His holy magistracy. He can neither connive at it by silence, nor perpetuate it by giving laws for its regulation, nor excuse it by letting down to its weakness His relaxed law. Sin is wrong absolutely—a deep curse to the universe, in *itself*—and when discovered by the searches of divine truth, whether in the individual heart or in the common practices of societies, must meet with the instant, the spontaneous, the overwhelming displeasure of Jehovah.

Now, in the face of such reflections, it is remarkable, to say the least, that the institution of compulsory slavery, as it existed throughout the Roman Empire, although often referred to in the New Testament, is never once condemned, never once even discountenanced. On the contrary, provision is made for its perpetuation, by means of the rules which are given for its regulation and improvement. So far from Scripture appearing as the destroyer, it appears as

the upholder, of an institution, which, *under proper management, by christian people*, is represented as an element in domestic completeness, whose presence is a benefit and a blessing. If it be a wrong, it is not so *in itself;* it can become so only when masters and servants misconceive and abuse their relationship to each other. We are led to understand that if the salt of *grace* be thrown into *this* branch of the family union, it will prove an auxiliary to the church and society only second to the parental and filial relationship. And, lest any should imagine that because the slavery of the Roman Empire was essentially different from that which we cherish, the Bible smiled upon that when it could not upon this, we have the amplest testimony of history to show that the two systems exhibited entire agreement in *principle*, and that they differ only in their circumstances. It is certain that our servile laws are indefinitely milder—every way more humane—than were those which existed when the Savior preached and the Apostles wrote. It is certain, too, that the institution in that ancient empire was far more extensive—more thoroughly domesticated—more perfectly inwrought into the very structure of society—than is the similar institution in this modern republic—and, therefore, was of such an amazing magnitude of proportions as that, if involuntary servitude were in itself an evil thing, *then* was presented the very best opportunity to strike it down forever with a blow from the hammer of the Spirit. A sin which overshadowed the land, which darkened every household, which hampered the church—surely a sin of such enormity would have been visited with the utmost severity of heaven's fury. But no: that fury nowhere appears in the threats or expostulations of Scripture. Instead, we

find a distinct law of permission, and an unequivocal note of favor, extended to it. The Bible would control and sanctify, but not destroy it.

In the days of the Apostles, it is proper for me to remind you, there was a party, whose numbers were scattered throughout the empire, which constituted the "abolition party" of that period. It is known that the Pharisees gave a special prominence to political freedom; joined with them were the Essenes; and binding together the whole, were certain philosophers who inculcated unattainable notions of universal liberty. These persons were in the habit of condemning Roman masters as unjust, impious, and destroyers of a law of nature. They inculcated the same abstract doctrines as those which have proceeded from mistaken philanthropy in our own distracted country, and which, at the time when Paul wrote to the Ephesians, were threatening the world with discord and bloodshed, as now, by the permissive wrath of God again they threaten. It was, therefore, to meet the unholy recklessness of such a destructive spirit, that the Apostles were careful to enjoin the conservation of an institution, which, though, like all other earthly institutions, attended by many circumstantial evils arising from the corruption of the human heart, was nevertheless no more wrong in its essential principles than the relation of husband and wife or father and child. And Paul was not a mere theoretical teacher upon this subject. He practised the righteousness which he enjoined. He once, at least, had it in his power to display the true spirit of christian love in his treatment of slaveholders. I refer you to his conduct with respect to Onesimus, a runaway slave belonging to that believer in Christ, Philemon. This servant

coming providentially under the influence of Paul's preaching, was happily converted. Being converted, what was his duty to his defrauded master? The spirit of christianity, which now resided in his heart, informed his conscience of the fact that he was the *property* of Philemon, and that while he remained away from his owner's home and authority, he was committing the sin of robbery. He consulted the Apostle. What was *his* advice? He did not hesitate to urge Onesimus to go at once to his master, confess at his feet the grevious fault he had committed, and beg to be received once more among the number of his slaves. And that the reconciliation between master and servant might be hastened, Paul wrote, (and wrote under the inspiration of God,) a letter of beseeching tenderness to the offended owner, asking him to pardon the faithful fugitive and give him a place in his confidence, and telling him that he would now, with grace in his heart, be a far better servant than ever.

Such reasoning, from the implied allowance of slavery by inspired Scripture, is, my friends, conclusive enough upon the point in question. Let neither master nor servant dispute the righteousness, doubt the wisdom, or fear the reproach of the relation which they sustain towards each other. It is not sinful. It is not inexpedient. It is not degradatory.

IV.

But look at God's direct and positive *utterances* in the premises. I need only *point* you to them, so clearly do they establish the fact that this part of family order was always familiar to the divine mind in its plans of

human government. Domestic slavery is twice clearly acknowledged in the brief law of the Ten Commandments. In the 4th law, with regard to the proper observance of the Sabbath, the rule of righteousness is laid down, which provides for the periodical rest, during holy time, of the "man-servant and the maid-servant," who, together with the other *animate property* of the household, must suspend labor; and who, together with the other *rational members* of the family must expend their thoughts in glorifying God. In the 10th law, again, which establishes those social relations of mankind, whose integrity and purity must be maintained *in heart* if they would be productive of good *in fact*, and where, accordingly, the *desires* of men are forbidden to covet neighbor's blessings—in this law, it is made a fatal sin to covet his "*man-servant* or his *maid-servant*," just as it is to covet any other of his possessions.

This recognition of involuntary servitude is, we say, thus found imbedded in the very heart of the *moral law* itself—that law which determines the *principles* of divine administration over men—a law which constitutes, if I may so speak, the very *constitution* of that royal kingdom whose regulations begin and end in the infinite holiness of Jehovah, and whose spread through the universal heart of the race is the aim of all Scripture.

But, in addition, hear the express words of the Holy Ghost in the Levitical law—words which embody an explicit provision for the *future* possession, by the Israelites, of man in property which they did not have at the time these words were spoken: a provision, then, not to regulate what already existed, but to legalize what was, 40 years afterwards, to become a distinct institution:

"Both thy bondmen and thy bondwomen which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids. And ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you to inherit them for a possession; they shall be your bondmen forever." No law can be plainer. No instruction of truth could more convince the christian that he is standing upon the surest and safest ground, whenever he resists the imputation that he is *a sinner* while upholding a system of domestic servitude. He can triumphantly say: "I direct you to the law and testimony!"

V.

But my hearers, if you wish for further conviction, carry your belief of the essential rightness of slavery to the injunctions of our text, which the Apostle publishes for its *conservation and perfection*. He as much as says, that it is unnecessary to fear that this long-cherished institution will first give way before the enemies who press upon it from without. If slaveholders preserve it as an element of social welfare, in the spirit of the christian religion, throwing into it the full measure of gospel-salt allotted to it, and casting around it the same guardianship with which they would protect their family peace, if threatened on some other ground—they need apprehend nothing but their own dereliction in duty to themselves and their dependent servants. I mean, simply, that while we ought to allow no malignant interference from any quarter with the institution of which we are God's appointed guardians, and while we ought to be suitably alive to any threat of presumptuous violence which may seek to wrest from us our heaven-given rights in our heaven-allowed property—yet, after all, the wisdom

which lies underneath the spirit of this sensitive watchfulness of our political zeal, and which gives to that zeal its purity and power, is the wisdom to be exercised in making our domestic servitude all that it should become, so as to render it *worth* the expenditure of every energy of defence. We must see to it, that masters and servants understand and appreciate their mutual relation, and that they maintain it on both sides as christians. This is the object of the apostolic exhortations before us, and upon which I will now briefly eomment: exhortations which, seeking to purify domestic servitude, do thereby bring it completely within gospel sanctions.

There are certain viees which slavery is apt to engender, in preference to all others. These are founded in indolence, eye-service and hypocrisy. These evils appear in a variety of forms, and are a constant source of irritation and unhappiness. But, so far as the servant is eoncerned, they are met by one simple injunction, the injunction of *obedience* to his master. If obedience be sineere, be consistent, be from proper motives, it will remove every vice from the servant's temper and eonduct. The Apostle, therefore, presents to the reader those noble qualities of servile allegiance which will elevate it at once to the high point of *christian* eompliance with rightful anthority; the only worthy compliance. He exhorts servants to obey, 1st, with conseientous anxiety: expressed by "fear and trembling." Not, however, so much the fear of man as a reverential fear of God, is to be understood in these words. It is not the servile dread of punishment. It is a eareful and painstaking solicitude *to do right* under all the circumstances of their relation, because the eye of heaven rests upon them

and will follow with its displeasure every act or course of wrong-doing. Obedience must, 2dly be with "singleness of mind:" not hypocritical, not deceitful, not inspired by duplicity or cunning. There must be no double-mindedness, but the giving to the business in hand all the simplicity of an honest purpose. Service is to be yielded upon principle, not with that attempt to please both self and the master which ends in "*eye-service*," and then only seems diligent and complete when he is present, but breaks down into remissness when he is absent. And to this excellence will obedience attain when, 3dly, it issues from the heart which desires first of all to please *Christ*. Obey "not as men-pleasers" says the exhortation, "but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God" in your station, "from the heart; with good-will, doing service, *as to the Lord* and not to men." The servant is, like the child, to know that the authority under which he has been placed is from above, and that the master rules him as the agent of heaven. He must, therefore, do his whole duty with his thoughts fixed upon that divine *upper hand* of which the lower one of his owner is but the representative. Disobedience to his proprietor on earth, is rebellion against the law of God, who is the first and principal proprietor of all. And this consideration is required in order to render the service good, elevating and self-rewarding. To serve Him, who is infinitely holy and infinitely great, while giving heed to his temporal and imperfect master, throws into the servant's obedience that element which makes it eminently saint-like, and gives it a place in his christian experience. So that he goes through his daily duties with this consolation, singing its glad song to his labor: "*Whatever good thing*

any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free."

What a pleasing scene would the institution of slavery exhibit, were all our servants to yield their obedience in this spirit of the christian religion! It would commend itself to true philanthropy as containing the best system of labor which is allowable to fallen man. But alas! the bondmen whom we own and employ, while occupying the most favorable position for improvement and happiness that is possible to them, are, as yet, far from being imbued with that love to God, which alone can raise their lot to its highest dignity. We thank God that so many of them are pious—that from so many of their comfortable houses comes the voice of prayer and praise—and that so many of them are conscientous servitors of man for Christ's sake. But we ought to look forward to the time when they will all be what the Bible would make them; a race whose love for the Master above will spread through their rejoicing millions a measure of sanctification which will convert their services into the very first of home-blessings, and their piety into a missionary influence for saving the black man everywhere from the ruin of perdition.

But to accomplish this, their earthly masters have something—have much—to do. "*Ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening; knowing that your master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with Him.*" For masters to "*do the same things*" which their servants are required to do, is for them to "act towards the dependents with the same regard to the will of God, the same recognition of the authority of Christ, the same sincerity and good feeling which has been enjoined upon the slaves them

selves." God concedes nothing to the master beyond what the *law of love* demands. He does not allow the reign of injustice over this institution any more than over the other departments of family order. Every dictate of humanity does, indeed, render necessary the maintenance of a due subordination of the servant to his proprietor: righteousness in fulfilling the obligations of the relationship does not ask for *equality*, but rather repudiates it, seeing that the best interests of all parties can be served only on the terms which nature and providence and scripture have fixed—the terms of mastery on the one side and servitude on the other. But, notwithstanding the careful guardianship of the principle of authority on the part of owners, yet must they not forget that they are to give an account to God at last for the right use of their exalted stewardship—the stewardship over *souls of immortal men*, placed directly underneath their control. They are to endeavor to train up their servants for heaven—as much bound to do this as they are bound to attend to the religious instruction of their own children. Masters are, for this end, even required to guard their tempers, that they may be guiltless of unnecessary severity in the treatment of their domestics; to "avoid threatening:" but to administer a firm, consistent, orderly, paternal government, which will suitably mingle the mercy of punishment with the justice of reward. They must remember to treat their servants as they will expect their own Master in heaven to treat *them*. They must not neglect discipline, but it must always be the discipline which is dictated by holy principle. In short, the master who would do for his servants up to the full measurement of Bible requirements, will find himself unequal to the task in all its

length and breadth, unless he himself beeome a *christian* in heart and practice. To vital goodness alone belongs the privilege of understanding and administering the whole authority of a masterhood so responsible. And, oh, when that welcome day shall dawn, whose light will reveal a world covered with righteousness, not the least pleasing sight will be the institution of domestic slavery, freed from its stupid servility on the one side and its exeesses of neglect or severity on the other, and appearing to all mankind as containing that seheme of politics and morals, which, by saving a lower race from the destruction of heathenism, has, under divine management, contributed to refine, exalt, and enrich its superior raee!